

Sulpicia: the mistress writes back?

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Roman love poetry is full of men proclaiming their love in lofty and not so lofty terms. They promote an early version of ‘make love not war’ (– or rather ‘love as war’ *militia amoris*), they talk to doors that separate them from their beloveds (paraclausithyron), they are constantly obsessed with their own obsession – and they write about it. Their female beloveds, Lesbia, Cynthia, Delia etc., are made into famous objects of their love and poetry (as well as fantasy). However, we might wonder how a real Lesbia, Cynthia or Delia would have felt as subjects. How would a Roman woman have felt about it all? And would it be possible for her to express her feelings?

The American poet Dorothy Parker offers a fictional answer to the question of how Catullus’ Lesbia would have felt in her poem ‘From a letter from Lesbia’ (compare Catullus poem 2):

*... So, praise the gods, at last he’s away!
And let me tend you this advice my dear:
Take any lover that you will, or may,
Except a poet. All of them are queer.*

*It’s just the same – quarrel or a kiss
Is but a tune to play on his pipe.
He’s always hymning that or wailing this;
Myself, I much prefer the business type.*

*That thing he wrote, the time the sparrow died –
(Oh, most unpleasant – gloomy, tedious words!)
I called it sweet, and made believe I cried;
The stupid fool! I’ve always hated birds ...*

But it’s possible that we have such a response from antiquity in the six short poems at the back of the so-called Corpus Tibullianum – the collected poems of Tibullus – (3.13–18). In these poems the first person narrator is a certain Sulpicia, daughter of Servius, who certainly is not ‘but a tune’ on someone’s pipe (she is that, too, of course – in the five preceding poems written about her partly from a third person perspective (3.8–12)). If we are to believe most contemporary scholars, we here have a genuine Roman girl expressing how mad she is about the boy.

Woman in love

If we take it that Sulpicia did write these poems, we have here the only poetry written by a woman from ancient Rome. We have fragments of a second Sulpicia, and we know that a few other women wrote poetry, for instance the notorious Sempronia (whom the historian Sallust describes as typical of the immoral aristocratic women of the late republic), but Sulpicia is the only one whose work actually survives. She represents a unique counterpart to the otherwise male dominated Roman love poetry – a genre very much concerned with women but which does not generally give them much of a voice. It is important to stress, however, that we are dealing with a woman quite unlike Lesbia, Cynthia and Delia, whose social status remains ambiguous. When Sulpicia in one of her poems introduces herself as Servius’ daughter, she places herself firmly within the very ‘high society’ of the Augustan aristocracy. And in another poem she addresses the famous patron of poets and Augustan general Messalla (apparently her uncle), a connection which puts her in the high-

est literary and political circles.

So what are the poems by Sulpicia about? How does a Roman *puella* speak? The Sulpicia poems deal with a love-affair between Sulpicia and a certain Cerinthus. The beloved man bears a Greek name that matches the pseudonyms of his female elegiac counterparts, Lesbia, Cynthia and Delia. The poems are shorter than most of those by Sulpicia’s male colleagues, and have the character of little notes perhaps slipped under the door. Unsurprisingly we do not find Sulpicia claiming that she wants to be a soldier of love rather than war, nor do we find her using the metaphor of love as slavery, *servitium amoris*. While in case of her male counterparts the notion of the male lover as enslaved by his mistress involves a reversal of conventional power relations between the sexes, in Sulpicia’s case the submission of female to male would have merely reflected the norm. However, her poems are characterised by the reversal of the active male (subject) and passive female (object) – for some readers an even more disconcerting scenario?

Sulpicia’s status as both real and aristocratic is a potential problem in relation to her moral standing. In the very first poem (3.13) Sulpicia tells the world that she has ‘been with’ her beloved. To ‘be with someone’ is a pretty obvious way both in antiquity and the present to refer to sexual relations. So suddenly we have a Roman noble girl behaving badly – or, at least, not as Augustus and Latin scholars officially would have liked her to. In this poem Sulpicia rejoices at the fact that love has finally arrived, and says that it would be more shameful for her to hide such a love than to reveal it. Given the poem’s place in the collection and the focus on communicating Sulpicia’s love, this is often read as a programmatic poem, one presenting readers with the subject of her poetry : love and talking about love. But the talking is far from easy. The Latin is rather convoluted and indirect, and rumour is clearly something that concerns her. This might perhaps tell us something about the problematic position of both the female poet and the female lover.

Two poems follow related to birthdays. In poem 3.14 Sulpicia complains to Messalla about the prospect of being separated from her beloved on her birthday. Inverting the poet Tibullus’ praise of rustic life, Sulpicia claims that a country-estate is no place for a girl (some have suggested the reason for this trip was that Messalla was in love with Sulpicia and wanted her for himself). In poem 3.15, the trip to the country is cancelled and Sulpicia is happy that this prospect of separation has been removed. These two poems can be read together, generating a focus on the potential effect of poetry – poem 3.14 might actually have succeeded in persuading its addressee. In the next poem 3.16, the situation is again problematic. Sulpicia is jealous and expresses herself in a bitterly ironic tone. Cerinthus has bestowed his favours on a simple prostitute and others are worried for Sulpicia. In this poem the narrator reveals her most patrician parentage and contrasts this with the circumstances of the toga-dressed prostitute. In poem 3.17 Sulpicia is taken ill and wants to recover only if her beloved wants her to. In the final poem 3.18, in a one-sentence epigram, Sulpicia apologises for having left Cerinthus the night before in order to hide her passion. This very evocative poem again conveys experience Sulpicia’s difficulty in telling – this time the person she is afraid

of telling is her beloved – as she defers giving the reason for her running away to the very final line.

Romancing scholars

Desire for a plausible narrative sequence and a higher morality for the poems is apparent in the ways scholars have responded to them. Some commentators have rearranged the poems into a sort of psycho-chronological narrative (3.13 here stands as the final poem, thus implying that at least Sulpicia waited a bit before she surrendered). Some scholars have also wanted to see a conclusion to the story in Tibullus 2.2. In this poem Tibullus addresses a certain Cornutus, who is read by some as Cerinthus (since the names are metrically equivalent, as is the custom with elegiac pseudonyms). In this poem Cornutus is married and the narrator prays to his birthday-genius for offspring. If one reads the wife as Sulpicia this would constitute a ‘happy ending’ and provide narrative closure to the affair. Another solution to the morality issue is to say that the poems are the work of Tibullus or some other male poet, and make it all into a male fantasy. Until the nineteenth century everyone believed the poems were by Tibullus anyway, since they were transmitted to us in the manuscripts containing his poems.

The Sulpicia poems have been called everything from sublime to amateurish and bad. While one German scholar found them more worth than anything in the entire corpus of Latin literature because they seemed so real and sincere, other scholars have dismissed them completely and asked why she bothered writing her notes in verse. These poems have puzzled and fascinated scholars throughout the ages and often led them to embroider the text, spinning such stories about the blushing young noble Roman that one might think they had fallen in love with her themselves. Most recently the new English translation by John Heath-Stubbs caused Sulpicia to make the headlines on Newsnight as a newly discovered, unmistakably modern, direct and impassioned voice from Antiquity. Although it is important to keep in mind that we cannot be totally sure that these poems are by Sulpicia, they do perhaps offer the possibility of getting a glimpse into the world of an Augustan girl. And surely they are a counterbalance to all the enamoured Roman men outside the doors of their beloveds ‘hymning that or wailing this’.

Mathilde Skoie does research on Sulpicia and her readers.

You can find an introduction to and commentary on the elegies of Sulpicia on the web at
<http://www.humanities.uci.edu/classics/cane/sulpicia.html>